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TURKEYS DO THEIR THING ON TV

Television can aid forestry research. In fact, without television, one recent Forest Service study would have been quite difficult to conduct; its findings, much less precise.

That study, attempting to determine the habitat requirements of wild turkeys, was done by Forest Service wildlife biologists at the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station Laboratory in Morgantown, W. Va. John Gill is in charge of the habitat research work unit there; Bill Healy, principal investigator for the study.

The television equipment they used consisted of an 18-pound TV camera, connected to a 1/2-inch, portable videotape recorder that can be carried over-the-shoulder. The equipment

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Forest Service Wildlife Biologist Bill Healy uses TV videotapes to facilitate data collection on wild turkey behavior and habitat requirements.

runs on its own battery power outdoors, and can be connected to AC current indoors. Playback of the crisp TV pictures with sync sound is accomplished by connecting the VTR to a TV monitor.

After obtaining several batches of wild turkey eggs and hatching them in an incubator, Healy "imprinted" scores of young game birds to himself. Imprinting is a method of socializing wild animals, so they respond to stimuli offered by the imprinter, but continue demonstrating their natural, wild tendencies. In this case, whenever Healy moved or called, the birds, who had learned to consider him their "Mother", would follow. This imprinting provided wild birds, who would permit observation by Healy and, thus, allow the collection of habitat data.

With a whole flock of imprinted birds under observation at one time, it was difficult (if not impossible) to see (let alone record) every noteworthy action taking place. But by using portable TV equipment to produce videotapes of events going on both during laboratory and outdoor data collection sessions Forest Service Biologist Healy and his wildlife research team found they were able to capture and keep an uncommon record of most of what was transpiring. The videotapes enabled them to review the turkeys' actions later on, without pressure, for a more complete and accurate scientific data collection than had previously been possible when monitoring on-the-scene. If necessary, taped sequences could be replayed again and again, giving scientists a chance to recognize and interpret even the slightest movement on the part of a bird.



Wild turkeys on TV.



A wild turkey acts natural for the TV camera.

TV tapes also provided evidence of certain phenomenal bits of behavior that could be shared with other wildlife researchers afterward. For instance, the male turkey's gobble and sexual strut -- often portrayed at Thanksgiving by the turkey with its feathers erect and fanned out -- were given by both male and female poult in the study and recorded on videotape before the birds had begun to develop sexually. Single poult were also pictured showing both male and female behavior; often the same chick would show both behaviors in rapid succession. It was only at 15 weeks of age when the birds had started to show secondary sexual characteristics that they took on their proper roles as males or females. Proof of this behavior is on videotape.

This videotaped data adds a dimension to the data collected by personal observation. Both forms of data will be combined to provide information on different behavioral characteristics of wild turkeys, as well as insights into their habitat requirements. This entire study will be repeated next year and researchers expect to use television more extensively and with greater refinement than, based on their experiences to date.

Forest Service Wildlife Aide Ellen Goetz fondles a brood of week-old turkeys, as part of the scientific imprinting process.



